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A PROGRAMME OF MUNICIPAL REFORM.

SINCE the Civil War the deterioration of city government in America has kept pace with several marked phenomena of the nation which may be taken as explanation of this deterioration. The first of these phenomena is the sudden vast growth of city populations. The second is the greatly increased diversity of American city populations, due partly to the rapid drain of rural communities and partly to the great increase in immigration from widening foreign origins. The third phenomenon is the almost wild scramble for wealth-producing occupations, which set in before the war was quite over, and quickly grew into a great national movement as the new and varied business opportunities opened wide. It was like the fever created by the discovery of gold in California, but on a national scale; so that men turned from an interest in public affairs to new and more intense interest in private affairs.

It is a mistake, however, to consider bad city government the only bad government which grew up after the war. As could not fail to be the case, when public interest became centered in private fortunes, all government deteriorated and the average man in all spheres of public life gradually lowered, and the standards of public life of course went down. National government fell off—state government fell off—county government fell off. City government fell off more than any other, however; but that was because there were more reasons against it—including the reason that there is less personal distinction to be gained in city politics than in national or in state politics, so that city politics were more easily abandoned and neglected. Many writers and speakers treat bad city government not only as a wholly isolated, abnormal development but as the most hopeless of all our political or social conditions. It is more true to say, however, that, while it is only one feature of a gen-

eral political deterioration, it is, in fact, perhaps the least hopeless of our political problems; for the reason that its direful state has come to be almost fully and quite generally realized, and is giving rise to the most earnest, eager, and patriotic political movements of the time. In these movements, so widespread and so interesting, we are all having a word to say; and it seems to me worth while to sum up, in what I have called a programme, a statement of what it seems to me is the work to be done; and which will possibly furnish to some readers a clearer conception of the obstacles that municipal reform has to encounter.

These obstacles divide themselves into two classes: first, defects in charters and other legal equipment—in laws or constitutions; and, secondly, deficiencies in volunteer support by the people—support which cannot be supplied by laws or constitutions.

The first class of obstacles I shall treat as summarily as possible, because I am more anxious to accent the other; and because it seems to me that so much is habitually said about reforms in the mechanism and laws of city government that far too much trust is placed in them.

I shall, then, in the form of a summary, and with little or no discussion or comment, enumerate those features of a city charter which, being most favorable to the introduction of business methods, most discouraging to those who would use the government for their own ends and most encouraging to the other sort of citizens, are necessary in a programme of reform.

First: Executive Independence—the independence of the mayor, and, under the mayor, the independence of each head of a department.

To insure this independence the executive work of the government must be wholly in the hands of the mayor; and all appointments to office, in the executive departments, must be made by the mayor without confirmation by the council.

Second: Executive Responsibility.

Just as the mayoralty is filled by one man, not only for the

sake of greater executive efficiency but also to concentrate and make definite the responsibility of mayoralty action, so each department, for both these reasons, should be presided over by one man. Executive boards should not exist in city government. They would paralyze a charter made by the National Municipal Reform League itself.

Third: The Restriction of the Powers of the Council.

This is of extreme and critical importance. At present in most cities the council is the branch chiefly to be reconstructed. It is the seat of the worst corruption, and the occasion of the worst evils of the situation. It is also the branch which has had the least actual reform, and the least attention from reformers. The charters have generally advanced very greatly and successfully in respect to the executive; but the successful handling of the problems involved in city legislation have not very far progressed. The word I especially wish to speak, as to charter reforms, is that the reform of the city council is more imperative by far than anything else, taking all the cities of the country together—and that the existing evils of city legislation are by far the most crying evils of city government.

I shall only indicate general lines of this reform:—

1. All executive power and authority should be taken away from the councils.

2. The right or power to initiate the grant of franchises should be taken away from the council.

3. No power should reside in the council to increase assessments for taxation or the rate of taxation, nor to authorize or create debt, except within the strict limits laid down by the constitution and general laws of the state.

4. Common-sense rules governing councils to prevent hasty and unconsidered action should be incorporated in the general laws of the state.

5. The number of members of councils should be carefully limited.

6. Members should be elected for two years, one half at a time, on general tickets.

7. One house is enough—to say the least.

8. Members should be paid reasonable and adequate salaries—and should not be expected to steal them.

So much for charter reform.

The next great feature of good legal environment is Civil Service Reform—the Merit System. This should embrace all appointees and employés except the chiefs of departments and their private secretaries.

And the next is Home Rule.

This means:—

1. A charter granted in a general incorporation law of the state.

2. The limits of taxation made by the state constitution and strictly general laws of the state.

3. A constitutional prohibition of special legislation.

4. No appointments of city officials made by any state authority.

And the next is Election Reform.

1. The Australian ballot.

2. Laws governing primaries—bringing primary elections under the regular and rigid control of law as other elections are.

3. A corrupt practices act—applicable to committees and candidates.

4. Separate city elections.

This concludes a summary statement of what I believe is needed in the legal environment and the mechanism of city government—a programme of municipal reform which would remove the present legal obstacles to the introduction of business methods.

Before passing to the second class of obstacles, I wish to mention an interesting item of nearly all programmes of municipal reform, which does not seem as clear a prospect to me as it does to many. I refer to the demand for non-partisan nominations. Most assuredly I should have no objection to city government without national parties if that were possible. But having had a good deal to do, first and last, with the effort to separate city

politics from national parties, I have come to the conclusion that, as a permanent condition, it is not possible. And it is borne in upon my mind that we are wasting a great deal of valuable force in pursuing what seems to me, after a somewhat long and unsuccessful pursuit, a first-class jack-o'-lantern. It would be a great drawback to the influence of the people if citizens' tickets were not always an ultimate resource ready to their hand; but I believe such tickets can only be reckoned upon as an occasional resort, or as a sword of Damocles hanging over the heads of politicians.

There are supposed to be three alternatives: no permanent parties at all; permanent parties divided exclusively on local issues; and national parties. It seems to me that we must deny our political instincts and habits, and the American commitment to government by parties, before we can assume that the politics of our great cities will get on without permanent parties.

On the other hand, it seems to me that our imagination can hardly grasp parties permanently divided on city issues. Certainly I am wholly at a loss to construct permanent dividing lines for such parties. But even if we could construct such parties, where is the proof that they would be any better than the national ones? Sudden popular movements which result in citizens' tickets may be wise and public-spirited; but regularly established city parties, if conceivable at all, would, in face of the facts of organization and unavoidable machines, have no more chance of wisdom and public spirit than any other party machines. It is not the name of the party but the fact of the organization—of the machine—which makes the result.

So that, it seems to me, we can neither expect to get on without established parties, nor, having established parties, can we expect to escape machine methods whatever the parties divide on; and it also seems to me that, whether we like it or not, we must get on in city politics with the national parties—except that as a last resort there is the citizens' ticket as a corrective of a permanent party system. Even in London the effort to keep the new government on non-partisan lines has wholly and most conspicuously

failed—a fact, it seems to me, full of instruction to American municipal reformers.

Since it is probable to my mind that we must get on with the national parties, I like to think of the less unfavorable aspects of the situation; and I do not at all think the case a hopeless one. It would seem that parties counted good enough to decide and direct all the federal affairs of the nation, all the state affairs of the states, and all of our delicate international affairs might, *if properly looked after by the people*, be made good enough to handle what is left of our political affairs, to-wit: the government of our cities,—especially with the extraordinary aid of that corrective agency, the citizens' ticket, which is wholly lacking in international, national or state politics.

Of course these parties won't work the will of the people if not attended to by the people. And why should they? But neither would any other parties. And if the people really intend to run parties in their cities, after having so long neglected to do so, I do not see why they cannot run the existing parties as well as new ones; and save themselves the impossible task of building up other parties that cannot be built up.

The effective remedy, as it seems to me, is rapidly growing up—not independent parties in municipal affairs, but independent voting in municipal affairs. A phenomenal increase in this is one of the striking features and factors of the times; and has the advantage, over the establishment of the parties, of being in the actual drift and current of the popular movement.

All of which, bringing me to the second class of obstacles brings me to what I have especially to say—which is, that no change in the mechanism of city government, nor any number of such changes, will of themselves bring us good city government or business methods in city government; and no change in the patronage system, however helpful and beneficial, will of itself, nor associated with any number of charter improvements, bring us good government; nor will the fullest measure of home rule, added to all these good things, bring it. But something else and far different is needed as a final change, to-wit: a change in the

political habits of the people—a change from habitual neglect of political duties by the body of our so-called good citizens to habitual attention to them. Happily, this does not involve a change of heart and habit in all so-called good citizens. That would be hopeless—for large numbers of “good citizens” are at present incapable of good citizenship. But all are not needed; for so potent is righteousness and right thinking in city affairs that one righteous citizen is stronger than a hundred workers of evil. It does not take all to gain control. And control is not as far off as it was a few years ago. When New York can have fairly good government for even one year no city need to despair. A new era is at hand. The “good citizen” is to give place to a better citizen.

Much may be done by charter changes and the like to prepare the way; but it is impossible to get good city government in America without reforming the attitude of the well-intentioned people. And one cannot too emphatically, or too often, cry out against the tendency to overvalue the importance of technical changes and reforms. They are right and good—but they after all touch but the lifeless form of city government that can only be made alive, can only be touched by the Promethean fire, by the energy of men without axes to grind. The ideas of good government cannot enter otherwise into these nerveless forms. Public spirit, the only source, the only spring, of life for good city government in America, cannot gain a foothold in city government except through the energy of the well-intentioned men in the community. I speak of permanent phases. Certainly a mayor, however elected, may be a public-spirited official—and for the time being we may have one man striving against tremendous odds. But right city government can be permanently brought about only through the reform of the bad habits of the good people.

It is so strongly my feeling that the trouble lies in the disused or weakly used citizenship of the honest part of the people that I principally care to urge that thought. All that has been so far done is due to the awakening of popular interest, to the

stirring up of the latent good citizenship of the communities. We can have business methods in city government with a good charter or without a good charter whenever the citizens who believe in these methods care to take the trouble. It is far easier to accomplish good government with than without a good charter, and with than without the Merit System, and with than without Home Rule; but it is impossible with all these aids and without the aid of the well-intentioned people.

When, therefore, I mentioned the chief features of a good charter and civil service reform and home rule as the features of the programme of reform, however much I valued these things in themselves, I valued them also as the removals of so many obstacles to the activity of the non-machine citizen. These reforms are intended to make it hard for the evil doers and easy for the righteous. But they are not panaceas, for it is not possible to get good city government to work automatically. No machinery possible to be devised will act by itself and produce good city government—or automatically work on the lines of business methods. There is no perpetual motion in city government; and if there should be, it would—with such citizens as we have now—perpetually produce a mass of corruption and incompetency and public disgrace. Somebody will run the government because it cannot run alone. If the “good citizens”—who are in the majority—else free government would be an impossibility—wish to run the city, they can; if they do not run it, citizens not so good will run it. A good system of government will not produce good government without good citizens. It will merely make bad government more difficult for bad citizens. We have, for example, in Chicago, all of these good things except a reformed council, including civil service reform and home rule; but our enemies permit themselves to say that better government than we have is still a possibility of the future.

Now, if the obstacle of obstacles to good city government is the non-participation of the good citizen in city politics and city affairs—and if this is not a mere vague fling at one's neighbors but a scientific fact—let us inquire why this obstacle

exists. I think it is explained by four states of the public mind.

First, there is the feeling that one is under no obligation to take part in city politics and government. Nothing is more abnormal than this, and yet nothing is more common. One would think if a man wished to live without the duties of citizenship he would find a country where government is not done by the people; and that if he preferred a country governed by the people he could not live in it without a sense of his share in the power and responsibility of government. But most of us both refuse to live in any other country and refuse to really *live* in this; for a man who in a self-governed country does not help to govern does not live, but merely hangs on. The saving clause is that at the bottom of our minds most of us do admit the responsibility of citizenship even when on the surface we deny it; and certainly those of us who rise to political consciousness in occasional spurts show that we might live useful civic lives if somebody would wake us really up.

Secondly, there is the customary sentiment toward the city government that it is something apart from ourselves—something we have a right to swear at as outsiders, feeling that its horribly neglected duties are enough to provoke that saint, “the good citizen.” It is supposed to be for us, to be sure, but not of us nor by us. It does not occur to us to blame ourselves or to think we do it.

Thus we neither govern nor give up self-government; and as a consequence we get a government never contemplated in any system conceived by mortal man, whether monarchic, absolute or limited, aristocratic, oligarchic, democratic or republican. We get a government for which a new name will have to be invented signifying a government by the greatest unfit.

The third abnormal state of mind which, according to my analysis, leads to the present attitude of the good citizen is chiefly due to the money-getting spirit of the age. This extreme money-getting craze is sure to be modified in time. In its present abnormal degree the money-getting spirit is new, and there

is no reason to fear that it can last. If it were to last all of the really spiritual elements of our national life would be driven to emigrate. It would be an instance of Gresham's law applied to the factors of national character.

This third state of mind is the feeling of the "good citizen" that he can treat citizenship from a pecuniary point of view and thus can afford to endure bad government better than he can afford to give time to get good government. This is not peculiar to the very rich, but to all well-intentioned citizens, whatever the amount or sources of their income. The feeling is that one may choose between taxes or personal convenience and political effort; that citizenship can be taken for nothing, or, like some foreign titles, can be paid for in cash, and things squared once for all; squared with the town and squared with one's conscience.

There is but one step from all this sense of irresponsibility and self-separation from city government—and I believe this is the very road which is taken—to that deep pit of fallen citizenship into which men plunge who bribe their way through city government to what they want. These men commit the unpardonable sin of city life. I know of nothing in all the range of municipal reform more important than the tearing up by the roots of the infamous practices of bribery. There is no worse citizen in America than the good citizen who pays a bribe. He is as much worse than the man he bribes as his social and financial opportunities are greater and his temptation less. His crime is committed without necessity and without haste. It is cold-blooded, mercenary debauchery, and wholly inexcusable. It inevitably must be stopped. It furnishes food for the greater part of the corruption of city government; with the spoils system it furnishes nearly all; and it is impossible to reform city government as long as this horrible vice in its present virulence exists. It is not only a grand obstacle to the introduction of business methods in city government, and it is not only immoral, dishonest and dishonorable as scarcely anything else in the corruption of city life is, but, upon the part of the bribers, is scandalously

mean and degraded, in view of their chances in the honorable competition of business life and of the absence of all serious temptation. As I believe the uprooting of these practices to be of the greatest moment to municipal reform, I beg to offer the practical suggestion that a change might be made in the laws punishing the crime. We have tried without avail laws making both briber and bribed equally punishable, because, as both are liable to punishment, both have the highest motive for secrecy—and evidence can hardly ever be obtained. We have also tried making the bribed alone punishable; and this has not availed because the briber is usually a man of too much position to be willing to tell the truth and appear in his true light. He is of that higher grade of criminals which can be trusted to believe in honor among thieves. I suggest the remaining alternative of making punishment apply only to the briber, for though the bribed would not always peach, he is of the sort that certainly sometimes would; and the briber, knowing the grade of man he was dealing with, would always regard him as a man who might; and would be apprehensive that when exposure did not follow, blackmail would; all of which would add new risks that very few monied men would dare to take. Moreover, in city government bribery there are usually so many of the bribed that the risks of exposure or blackmail would be immensely multiplied.

The fourth and the last which I have to mention of these explanatory states of public consciousness is the lack of sensitiveness to the evils of city government. The public conscience is not sensitive to the corruption of city government. Nor is it alive to the baseness of bribery. The public taste is not awake to the disorder and dirt and general ugliness of our cities. Public pride takes but little offense at those things which make our cities a reproach to civilization. The public mind is not yet fully alive to the excess of partizanship in city affairs; nor to the excess of partisanship in the newspapers, which in purely city affairs protect their parties when in office and keep them from serving the city at their best; and even deter many good men, by intemperate criticism, from going into city politics at all.

But even for these faults of the newspapers the people must blame themselves, because newspapers are what people expect them to be, nothing in the world being more dependent upon public taste and public approval than the press.

The most underlying of all the causes of the people's neglect of city politics is this want of sensitiveness to the evils of bad city government; for you cannot get people to exert themselves to cure evils they do not mind.

The remedy is education. That sounds remote and disappointing; but it is not so bad as it sounds. I wish it were not so bad as it is; but that cannot be helped. You cannot have good city government without energetic good citizens to counteract energetic bad citizens; and you cannot get citizens to be energetic against corrupt public life if they do not heartily hate corruption, nor against shocking incompetence and neglect if they are not shocked by them, nor against bribery if they do not heartily hate bribing and despise bribers, nor against filthy streets and disgraceful sanitation if their lives are not made unhappy by them, nor against prodigal, selfish and partisan waste of the public funds if their indignation is not stirred by it. Therefore we must first stir the people to see all these things with an abiding consciousness that burns into the brain, and hate them with an abiding hatred that perpetually stirs resentment. Education is the only remedy. This education has begun. It has begun prosperously and hopefully. New citizens are constantly enlisting in the fight which is growing warm against the audacious travesty of free government in our cities. There is no conversion needed, for no sane man defends American city government. What is needed is to educate and stimulate the sensitiveness of the citizens; and to stir their blood. Agitation and publicity are the chosen methods of this education.

The most essential preliminary is to understand the problem—to understand the limits and the particulars of what is needed to be done. After that we have nothing to fear; we have only to "learn to labor and to wait;" for whatever is needed will surely be accomplished by the growing spirit of reform, no

matter how long the effort must be prolonged. The evidences of this are stirring on all sides ; but we could infer it, without present evidence, from the political genius of the American people and its exalted mission to establish and protect self-government ; for our political genius and our exalted mission alike would prove themselves the greatest disappointments of political history if the permanence of such city government as we have today were even a possibility.

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